

How Committees Work

1. What is the Committee of the Whole?

The Committee of the Whole House is a committee of the House on which all Representatives serve and which meets in the House Chamber for the consideration of measures from the Union calendar. However, it is governed by different rules of procedure than the House meeting as itself. The concept of the "grand committee" has been carefully developed from the early days of the House and in modern practice gives the House a more expeditious means for considering the complex and often controversial legislation referred to it.

Historically it was devised by the English House of Commons to give them the ability to debate privately and not have their votes committed to record. The Committee of the Whole in the U.S. House, however, has permitted recorded votes since January 1971. The House resolves itself into a new Committee of the Whole for the consideration of a bill. A specific Committee of the Whole is dissolved when it "rises and reports with a recommendation," to the House. When the Committee rises after not having resolved the matter committed to it, that bill is carried on the calendar as "unfinished business of the Committee of the Whole" until consideration has been finally completed.

2. What is a standing committee?

Standing committees are permanent panels identified in Chamber rules, which also list the jurisdiction of each committee. Because they have legislative jurisdiction, standing committees consider bills and issues and recommend measures for consideration by the House. They also have oversight responsibilities to monitor agencies, programs, and activities within their jurisdictions, and in some cases in areas that cut across committee jurisdictions. Most standing committees recommend authorized levels of funds for government operations and for new and existing programs within their jurisdiction, but a few have other functions.

3. What are the current standing committees of the House?

Currently, there are 20 current standing committees of the House: Agriculture; Appropriations; Armed Services; the Budget; Education and the Workforce; Energy and Commerce; Ethics; Financial Services; Foreign Affairs; Homeland Security; House Administration; the Judiciary; Natural Resources; Oversight and Government Reform; Rules; Science, Space, and Technology; Small Business; Transportation and Infrastructure; Veterans' Affairs; and Ways and Means.

[View the list of current standing committees of the House of Representatives.](#)

4. How are the members of the standing committees selected?

Before Members are assigned to committees, each committee's size and the proportion of Republicans to Democrats must be decided by the party leaders. The total number of committee slots allotted to each party is approximately the same as the ratio between majority party and minority party members in the full Chamber.

Members are then assigned to committees in a three-step process. Each of the two principle parties in the House is responsible for the assigning its members to committees, and at the first stage, each party uses a committee on committees to make the initial recommendations for assignments. At the beginning of the new Congress, Members express preferences for assignment to the appropriate committee on committees. Most incumbents prefer to remain on the same committees so as not to forfeit expertise and committee seniority. These committees on committees then match preferences with committee slots, following certain guidelines designed in part to distribute assignments fairly. They then prepare and approve an assignment slate for each committee, and submit all slates to the appropriate full party conference for approval. Approval at this second stage often is granted easily, but the conferences have procedures for disapproving recommended Members and nominating others in their stead. Finally, at the third stage, each committee submits its slate to the pertinent full Chamber for approval, which is generally granted.

5. What constitutes a quorum of a standing committee of the House?

Each House committee is authorized to establish its own quorum requirement for the transaction of business. House rules specify that House committees shall have at least two members present to take testimony or receive evidence and at least one-third of the members present for taking any other action, except reporting out a bill to the floor. However, a physical majority of the committee members must be present to report a bill to the floor.

6. What are select committees?

Select committees usually are established by a separate resolution of the parent chamber, sometimes to conduct investigations and studies, sometimes to consider measures. Often one is established because the existing standing committee system does not address an issue comprehensively, or because a particular event sparks interest in an investigation. A select committee may be permanent or temporary. Special committees, and more rarely, undesignated committees, tend to be similar in constitution and function.

7. What are joint committees?

Joint committees are made up of members of both chambers. Today, they usually are permanent panels that conduct studies or perform housekeeping tasks rather than consider measures. A conference committee is a temporary joint committee formed to resolve differences in Senate-passed and House-passed versions of a particular measure.

View the joint committees of the House of Representatives.

8. What are subcommittees?

Most committees form subcommittees with legislative jurisdiction to consider and report bills in particular issues within the purview of the full committee. Committees may assign their subcommittees such specific tasks as the initial consideration of measures and oversight of laws and programs in their areas. Subcommittees are responsible to and work with guidelines established by their parent committees. Consequently, their number, independence, and autonomy vary among committees.

9. What is the purpose of a committee hearing?

Committees frequently hold hearings to receive testimony from individuals not on the committee. Hearings may be for legislative, oversight, or investigative purposes. Legislative hearings are those addressing measures before the committee, and they may address many measures on a given subject. Oversight hearings focus on the implementation and administration of programs created by law. Many committees perform oversight when reauthorizing funds for a program, which may occur annually. Investigative hearings often address allegations of wrongdoing by public officials or private citizens, or determine the facts of a major disaster or crisis. Oversight and investigative hearings may lead to the introduction of legislative proposals. FDsys - GPO Access contains House and Senate hearings dating back to the 105th Congress (1997–1999).

10. What is meant by markup?

Following legislative hearings, a committee decides whether to report a measure, in which case it chooses a specific measure and perfects it through amendment. A business meeting for this purpose is called a markup. Both chambers require a minimum quorum of one-third of a committee's members to hold a markup session, and some committees establish a higher one. The process may be formal for controversial measures or relaxed for ones less contentious. In leading a markup, the chairman generally chooses the legislative vehicle, and presents it for consideration and amendment. This vehicle may be an introduced bill, or another version prepared by committee staff at the direction of the chair. Many individuals attempt to influence the content of measures, sometimes suggesting alternative language. A Member may offer an amendment containing alternative language, and a majority of a quorum is needed to adopt an amendment.

11. What is a committee report?

A reported measure usually is accompanied by a written document, called a report, describing the measure's purposes and provisions and telling Members why this version has been reported and why it should be passed. The report reflects the views of a majority of the committee, but also may contain minority, supplemental, or additional views of committee members. It usually includes estimates of the legislation's cost if it were to become law, various statements of its impact and application, a section-by-section analysis, and a comparison with existing law. Officials of the executive and judicial branches of government use these reports to determine the legislative history of laws and Congress' intent in enacting them. House Committee Reports from the 104th Congress to present are available from the Library of Congress' THOMAS Bill and Summary service.